CATALOGUES OF ART EXHIBITIONS ORGANIZED BY THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
45 South Street
Bishops Stortford
Herts CM23 3AG
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck
New Jersey 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1975

Series: The purpose of this series is to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers

Serial numbers: Each title is given a seven-figure serial number in the top right hand corner of the microfiche title strip. This is an accession number. The first figure indicates the number of the list in which the title first appears; the first three-figure group signifies the gallery or museum; the second three-figure group the accession number for that title.

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Technical data:

Producing laboratory: Micromedia Ltd, Kidlington, Oxford.

COLOUR PRINTS AND DRAWINGS BY HIROSHIGE

ARTS COUNCIL

1952

Foreword

BY 1858, the year of Hiroshige's death, the Japanese print was in its decline. This artist, however, has always enjoyed a marked and deserved popularity in the western world and, with his older contemporary Hokusai, was one of the first to receive recognition by European artists. Two of his prints were the subject of paintings by van Gogh. His command of atmospheric effects, his feeling for aerial perspective and his painterly eye for colour, miraculously translated into the medium of the flat colour print, appealed to the impressionists and in a lesser degree to English artists and critics.

By the general public, Hiroshige has probably been chiefly admired for his sets of views, brilliantly coloured but—to the eyes of some—crude by comparison with the tender, delicate colours of the earlier masters, owing to the insistence of the Prussian blue recently imported from Europe. And in the case of Hiroshige, in particular, the difference between individual copies of a single print is spectacular. Perhaps no other artist in this medium depends more on the subtlety and skill of the printer, and he himself gave personal attention to this part of the process.

It is the virtue of this particular exhibition, so generously lent by Mr Tikotin, that only prints of superlative quality have been admitted to his collection. It aims, too, to present the less well-known aspects of Hiroshige's art. None of the well-known Tokaido views are to be found here and only one of the Kisokaido series; but instead there is an enviable wealth of the rare bird and flower prints, the charming compositions for fans, two of the notable triptychs, a few enchanting still-life subjects for New Year prints (*surimono*), and some envelopes for greetings.

It is probably true to say that at no previous time has it been possible in this country to enjoy so wide a range of Hiroshige's work. Sincere thanks must be offered to Mr Tikotin. The scholarly introduction that follows has been written by Mr J. de Gruyter, and Mr Basil Gray of the British Museum has kindly supplied some of the notes and descriptions and helped with the selection.

PHILIP JAMES

Introduction

BORN IN 1797 IN YEDO, the present-day Tokio, Ichiryusai Hiroshige was a true 'Yedokko', or son of Yedo. With the exception of various journeys undertaken to sketch scenery, important because they supplied the subject-matter of many of his landscape prints, he spent the entire sixty-two years of his life in his native town, faithfully portraying its every aspect.

He was of simple birth and when still a boy he followed in his father's footsteps and became a fireman in the service of the Shogunate Government, or more correctly, a fire-official. The main advantage of this occupation was that it left him plenty of spare time. He nevertheless resigned when he was 27, since his employment prevented him from travelling. Already landscape painting was his chief interest.

He had decided to take up art after the death of his parents, when he was 14. Toyokuni, at that time highly famed for his theatrical prints, could not accommodate him in his studio, but after a first refusal the kindly Toyohiro admitted him as a pupil. Thus it is that he adopted the name of 'Hiro-shige': *hiro* being part of his master's name: *shige* occurring as a script-character in his own name Yuyemon.

According to Japanese custom he should have called himself the Second Toyohiro when his master died. But he declined, saying he was not worthy of such an honour. This may have been but a pretext, since he probably wished to create a style of his own, and would have felt himself hampered by the acceptance of Toyohiro's name. For in Japan, a name places obligations upon a man; and in the case of an artist, implies to some extent that he follows the same tradition. Be this as it may, Hiroshige's art only a few years later showed complete independence in his beautiful sets of prints, such as the 'Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido' (1833-34) and the 'Eight Views of Lake Biwa' (about 1834).

His highly personal style begins about 1831, when he was nearing the age of 35. Yeisen and Hokusai had prepared the way, and from Toyohiro he no doubt had learned much in the special art of *kwa-cho* (flower and bird pictures)

in which he excelled quite as much as in the landscapes for which he is famed. But nature was, from the first, his main teacher; hence he has rightly been called the most typical landscape artist of Japan. He studied nature with naïve curiosity, but was always her lover and never her servant—always her interpreter, never her imitator.

Being unambitious, single-minded in character, and content to live modestly, Hiroshige, despite a prolific output, never showed signs of haste, although he did perhaps rather neglect the supervision of the printing of his woodcuts in later years. Preserved fragments of diaries kept on his journeys give us the impression of a good-hearted man, who thoroughly enjoyed a drink of *saké* (rice-wine) and whose paramount interest was the daily weather. He exceeded the common level of learning among his fellow-artists, and, as might indeed be expected from his pictures, was, in a sense, a poet. He seems to have excelled in those little comic poems embodying a fanciful play upon words, or pun, which have always been popular in Japan; some of these being too piquant, however, to bear translation.

His life was uneventful. He moved house twice in Yedo; and he married twice, his first wife being the daughter of a *samurai* (a military man), his second 'a woman of the world' who shared his love of a cup of *saké*. He died from cholera at the age of 62, in the year 1858, and was buried at Asakusa, in the Togaku Temple in Kita Matsuyama-cho.

Upon his death his friend Kunisada drew his portrait and wrote above the signature: *We shed tears as we think of him.* The print shows Hiroshige seated with head shaved, a clear countenance with a strong thin nose, lips firmly closed, his eyes somewhat tired but very eager. There is more than a hint of mischievous humour in the expression. The writing on this woodcut by Kunisada also includes the little poem Hiroshige wrote on his death-bed, a free translation of which reads:

I leave my brush at Azuma,[1]
To view new sights
I take the long road to the West.[2]

[1] The eastern capital.
[2] The Buddhist hereafter.

Hiroshige's work followed its maker to the West, although in a less metaphorical sense. It reached Western Europe and found official recognition in our countries long before this was the case in Japan. It is hard to forget the Ryogoku Bridge, either with or without fireworks, when looking at Whistler's 'Old Battersea Bridge'; and we all know that van Gogh, though stylistically influenced by Hokusai rather than by Hiroshige, actually copied the latter's 'Ohashi in a Summer Shower', the copy naturally being a translation into his own vehement idiom.

But in Japan, the producers of *Ukiyoye* (Pictures of the Passing World) catered only for the common folk, who could not afford the price of a hanging scroll, but obtained the gaily coloured prints for a few coppers each. For social rather than artistic reasons the artists of this School, the last of the great Schools of Painting of the Far East, were barred from all recognition by the aristocratic classes. Most of the Ukiyoye artists were themselves of humble birth; they belonged essentially to the people and produced their work for artisans, tradesmen, peasants, all of whom in former days had never possessed a pictorial art of their own. Hence, wages were accordingly low; and a loudly appraised genius like Hiroshige, though never exactly poverty-stricken, had to work very hard in order to support himself and his family.

According to Mr Minora Uchida, Hiroshige left behind him more than 8,000 works of art, including painted screens and theatre-settings, which cannot be produced quickly. On the average he must have made two brush-drawings a day, and the number of his coloured woodcuts is estimated at about 5,500. Of Yedo and its surroundings he produced over fifty sets of prints, the most famous of which consists of 118 sheets. It should be remembered, of course, that a Japanese colour-print was the result of the work of four different people: the artist, who only made the design, the engraver, the printer, and finally the editor, who shared the responsibility and no doubt influenced the work. The entire technical process is too complicated to enter into here. But it should be noted that engravers and printers were looked upon as pure mechanics, although their labour required the very highest skill. In the case of Hiroshige's prints, the demands put upon the printer were

particularly severe, since he relied more than any other artist on exquisite gradations of colour; the quality of the printing, in fact, makes all the difference between a mediocre work of art and one of great artistic merit.

The interest of the present exhibition is enhanced by the fact that lesser-known aspects of his art are somewhat stressed. Generally speaking, Hiroshige is too exclusively judged from his famous sets of landscape prints, such as the Tokaido, the Kisokaido, and the so-called Hundred Views of Yedo. Many famous prints belonging to these well-known series have purposely been omitted, in order to include beautiful specimens of his *kwa-cho-tanzaku* (bird and flower poem slips), his prints for *uchiwa* (rigid fans), and his *surimono*.

The last word simply means 'something printed' and this category includes various kinds of smaller prints commemorating special events, such as New Year greetings, birth announcements, invitations to clubs, changes of name, and so on. Since these cards were never distributed commercially and were produced in limited editions, particular care could be lavished upon them. Thus the paper is often of the highest quality, the designs, usually accompanied by an appropriate poem and very rarely covering the entire surface, are playfully delicate, and the printing shows great clearness and precision. In this group of *surimono* we also may class the curious, oblong 'Letter Sheet Sets', upon which Hiroshige evokes a poetic and tender mood with the slightest of means. These were sold in rolls of twelve sheets, used as writing-paper by men of taste or noble birth, and then folded as an envelope. For obvious reasons they are rare.

The same holds good for the fan-prints, vast numbers of which must have been worn out and discarded; the Victoria and Albert Museum has, however, an extensive collection. Among Ukiyoye artists, Hiroshige was pre-eminent as a designer of such prints, completely adapting himself to the special requirements of composition as dictated by the unusual shape, and displaying wonderful powers of invention in variety and treatment of subject-matter. The majority of the designs served for the rigid fan, which was of very

ancient, probably of Chinese, origin. Being evidently considered too valuable for use, some fan-prints were unmounted again, in which instances the marks of the bamboo ribs remain clearly visible. A very fine example is the print, Iris and Kingfisher with gold disc of the Sun (No. 79).

Kwa-cho are narrow, upright compositions, showing the stem of a flowering plant or bough, and enlivened by a bird, or by butterflies, frogs, etc. Long narrow shapes of this kind, calling for special gifts of stylistic arrangement, had attracted Ukiyoye artists ever since Harunobu's days, and the space is almost invariably filled with a perfectly balanced design. But to appreciate the decorative eloquence only in the *Kwa-cho* would mean missing the essential: the keen observation, the sensitive drawing, the clear strong colouring, and, beyond that, something more spiritual, surpassing the simple subject and its beauty of treatment: a poetic quality, a reverential approach to nature, a desire and an ability to express the rhythmic flow of life and to give a glimpse of the universal, a hint of the infinite.

Far Eastern art always lays stress on suggestion rather than on actual representation, but this quality strikes us the more in Hiroshige's work because to all appearances he comes closer to objective realism than most Far Eastern artists ever did. This realism, however, has nothing in common with the *trompe l'oeil* sometimes to be found in Occidental painting. Hiroshige discarded many stereotyped formulae, but only to invent new stylizations by means of which he could render his subject in a fresh, appealing and unaffected manner. He painted what he saw, but only the essentials of what he saw. He listened before he spoke, and concealed more than he said. This again is typical of Chinese and Japanese art in general, but it appears more unusual in his case because he seems superficially to give us a plain statement of fact.

In fact, all extraneous details are eliminated through simplification and concentration, a method as bold as it is subtle, and frequently defying all analysis. In the process, reality becomes super-real—we should say super-real rather than 'abstract'. For 'abstraction' implies a certain conscious opposition to reality, which was utterly foreign to Hiroshige. What he possessed to a high degree was a marvellous gift of

entering into the core of his subject and carefully selecting those elements which help to convey his idea, and which make a direct appeal to the imagination of the beholder.

We see this quality, the essence of his genius, most clearly perhaps in some of his landscapes. They come easily and convincingly to the eye, and their forms are the forms of actuality. Hiroshige loved the earth and all upon it quite as much as did Constable and Courbet; and Japanese scenery was never rendered with more precision, nor were atmospheric phenomena observed more faithfully. The subtle differences between various sorts of snow, various sorts of mist, various sorts of rain are rendered to perfection; the figures in each composition are true to life, the effect of distance is wonderfully suggested, and the more wonderfully when we realize that such suggestions are made through the limited medium of coloured wood-engraving, which with Hiroshige is simply an arrangement of a certain number of colour-gradations laid over a structure of lines.

But if all this be reality, it is the music and magic of reality, the essence of reality.

By his honest, clear vision, by the inner logic of his simplifications, by his gift of suggesting space and bringing out the value of empty spaces, by his sense of structure, balance and rhythm, his power to harmonize all the elements of sight and feeling, and his avoidance of any hint of conflict or tragedy, Hiroshige re-creates the world for us and makes it good to live in, even if it be but for an hour spent in looking at his pictures.

W. JOS DE GRUYTER

Catalogue

1. Diptych
   Illustrating the legend of Prince Hansoku of India whose Princess was a golden-furred, nine-tailed, white-faced fox which by its supernatural powers had disguised itself as a mortal.

2. Triptych—*Three Geisha Girls* (*c.* 1830)

GRAND SERIES OF DATED TRIPTYCHS

3. *The Rapids of Awa no Naruto. View of the turbulent waters in the canal dividing the island of Shikoku from Awaji Island*
   Dated: 4th month of the Snake (1845)
   Publisher: Tsutaya, whose device appears on the print

SERIES: TOTO MEISHO. TRIPTYCH

4. *Taka nowa zenzu. Sailing-boats in the Bay of Yedo*

SERIES: TOTO MEISHO

5. *Nihonbashi under the rain*
   Publisher: Kikakudo

SERIES: THE EIGHT VIEWS OF OMI

6. *Rain by night on Karasaki*
   The great pine of Karasaki on its low promontory, with its spreading mass blotted by drenching rain. Dark blue water around the lighter blues of the stone embankment.
   Title: Karasaki no Seiran. Seal: Yeisendo
   Poem: 'Elsewhere will they talk of the music of the evening breeze that has made the pine of Karasaki famed; for the voice of the wind is not heard through the sound of the rain in the night'

SERIES: THE HUNDRED VIEWS OF YEDO

7. *Kabata. Plum trees in blossom* (No. 27)
   Dated: 11th month of the Snake (1857)

PLATE I *Two Horses under a Willow Tree at Full Moon*. No. 52

PLATE II *Still Life with Poem Cards and Box. No. 55*

PLATE III *Geisha with a Lantern, Ferry Boats and Full Moon (Uchiwa Fan). No. 64*

PLATE IV *Ohashi in a Summer Shower*. No. 12

8. *Matsuchiyama. Stars reflected in the blue water* (No. 34)
Geisha returning home by lantern light. Across the water Mimeguri tea houses
Dated: 8th month of the Snake (1857)

9. *Imado and Hashiba Ferry* (No. 37)
Smoke going up from pottery kilns; ferry-boats on the Sumida
Dated: 4th month of the Snake (1857)

10. *Yoshiwara, morning* (No. 38) (1857)

11. *Akasaka Kiribatake. Plantation in the evening rain* (No. 48)
Dated: 6th month of the Sheep (1859)
Signed: Hiroshige II

12. *Ohashi in a Summer Shower* (No. 52). PLATE IV
First Impression
Dated: 9th month of the Snake (1857)

12*a and b*. second impression of No. 12, different colourings

13. *The Temple of Komakata and the Bridge of Adzuma* (No. 55)
View with clouds and silver rain
Proof Impression
Dated: 1st month of the Snake (1857)

14. *The River Tone* (No. 61)
A great fishing net flung from the right cuts into the view of the river; a sailing boat; two white herons above; pines on the left bank
Dated: 8th month of the Dragon (1856)

15. *Saruwakacho. Yedo street scene by full moonlight* (No. 90)
An experiment in cast shadows
Dated: 9th month of the Dragon (1856)

16. *Fireworks over the Bridge of Ryogoku.* (No 98)
A rocket bursting in a shower of stars high in the dark sky over the Ryogoku bridge and boat-thronged Sumida
First Impression
Dated: 8th month of the Dragon (1856)

16*a*. A later impression of No. 16

17. *Kiba, Fukagawa* (No. 106)
Timber yard with falling snow; rafts on the river beneath; two puppies and yellow umbrella
Dated: 8th month of the Dragon (1856)

18. *Fukagawa, Susaki, the* 10,000 *acre Plain* (No. 107)
Stars reflected in the blue water. The claws of the eagle hovering over the water are lacquered
Dated: 5th month of the Snake (1857)

19. *Oji—Foxes scenting the fire on New Year's Day* (No. 118)
The most famous print in this series

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20. *Shishi the Lion testing the courage of his son by throwing him over a cliff, which either he must climb or die of starvation*

SERIES: TOTO MEISHO

21. *Cherry Blossom in Yoshiwara under the Full Moon*
Publisher: Kikakudo

TANZAKU

22. *Carp and Waterfall*
Printed in different shades of grey

23. *Swallow and Wistaria*
Poem: 'The swallow swinging on the tendrils of the murasaki flower, the favourite colour of the Yedo dyer'

24. *Swallows and Camellia in Snow*

25. *Two Wild Ducks and Flowering Reeds*

26. *Dragon and Tiger*
From the series 'The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac'
Undivided diptych

27. *Bull and Wild Boar*
From the series 'The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac'
Undivided diptych

28. *Eagle on Pine Tree*

29. *Wild Goose and Full Moon*
From a series, Toto Meisho

30. *Cuckoo over the River*
From a series, Toto Meisho

31. *Mount Fuji—distant view*
From a series, Toto Meisho

32. *Crane and Flowers*

DRAWINGS

33. *The Temple of Kameido and Inn*
Original sketch and print

34. *Temple in the Mist*

35. *The Province of Mutsu, Matsushima*

36. *The Province of Izumo, Matsu-e*

37. *The Province of Aki, Hibuku-shima*

38. *The Province of Musashi, Kanazawa*

39. *The Province of Ise, Asakuma*

40. *The Province of Waka*

41. *The Province of Dewa, Kisagata*

42. *Tago no ura (Suruga)*

TANZAKU—LANDSCAPES

SERIES: SHIKI KOTO MEISHO

43. *The Sumida River in the Snow*
Beside a steep bank, the solitary peasant poles a raft down the dark blue river, under a grey sky of falling snowflakes
Poem: 'The snowflakes fall and float on the Sumidagawa tide. I think of the Miyakadori dancers'

44. *Autumn Maples at Kaianji*

SERIES: TOTO MEISHO

45. *Sumidagawa-no Watashi. Ferry boats on the Sumida*
Publisher: Fujihiko

46. *Susaki Shiohigari. Shell-fish gathering at Susaki*
Publisher: Fujihiko

47. *Takanawa in the Moonlight*
Publisher: Kawa-sho

48. *Takanawa in the Moonlight*

49. *Sparrows and Poppies*

LETTER PAPER

(Printed in Surimono style, these papers were used by dignitaries and men of taste for letter-writing. There are consequently very few now remaining.)

50. *Teahouse in the Garden behind a Fence*
Publisher: Kasaya

51. *Birds, Flowers and other Subjects*
A collection of envelopes

SURIMONO

52. *Two Horses under a Willow Tree at Full Moon*
Printed in black and different shades of grey. PLATE I

53. *Two Dragons rising from the Waves*
Calendar for the year of the Dragon (1844)

54. *Still Life with Boxes and Seals*

55. *Still Life with Poem Cards and Box.* PLATE II

56. *Horse Race*

57. *Toy Animals and Mallet*

58. *Watch and Chain dated* 1823

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59. *An actor*, with No. 60, a pair of blue print caricatures

60. *A Mouse as an Actor*

FANS

A special form of print was made for mounting on a fan. Fan-prints were in two shapes; the *uchiwa*, for the round, non-folding fan, and the *ogi*, or folding fan. Owing to the uses to which they were put, which of necessity condemned them to a relatively short existence, fan-prints are not common, but the *uchiwa* shape is the one most frequently met with.

Most of those which have survived to our day are unmounted. However, mounted fan-prints are occasionally found, showing the marks of the ribs.

61. *A Branch of Cherry Blossom* (Uchiwa fan)
From a series 'Famous Poetesses'

62. *Iris Garden at Night* (Uchiwa fan)
From the series 'Toto Meisho'

63. *Moon, Pine Tree and Cuckoo* (Uchiwa fan)
Printed in black, grey and pale blue with delicate gradations; an example of Hiroshige's simplification.
Publisher: Ibasen

64. *Geisha with a Lantern, Ferry Boats and Full Moon* (Uchiwa fan) PLATE III
Publisher: Sanpei

65. *Woman, half-length, holding a small lacquered Cage, with Pine branches, on a pink ground* (Uchiwa fan)
From the series: 'Mitate Sambaso: Women compared with the Sambaso dance'
Hare year (1855)
Publisher: Ibasen. Engraver: Take

66. *White Rain on the River Sumida* (Uchiwa fan)
In the foreground an orange-coloured torii

67. *Boat with three Seagulls on the River Sumida* (Uchiwa fan)

68. *Full Moon on the River Sumida* (Uchiwa fan)
Publisher: Ibasen

69. *Night Rain on the Mountain* (Uchiwa fan)
From the series of eight scenes from the Chushingura play. The incident being Sadakuro threatening to kill Yoichibei

70. *Lobster* (Uchiwa fan)
A blue print

71. *Poem and Lantern with Mount Fuji* (Uchiwa fan)

72. *Humorous Print with Toy Fox* (Uchiwa fan)

73. *Dragon in the Clouds* (Uchiwa fan)

74. *Full Moon on the River Sumida, two Seagulls in the foreground* (Uchiwa fan)

75. *A Great Wave* (Uchiwa fan)
From the series: '36 Views of Mount Fuji'

76. *Transport of Goods over the frozen Lake Hakone* (Uchiwa fan)
From the series: '36 Views of Mount Fuji'

77. *Mountain Path with Pine Trees* (Uchiwa fan)

78. *Morning Glory and other Flowers on a Screen* (Uchiwa fan)

79. *Iris and Kingfisher with gold disc of the Sun* (Uchiwa fan)

80. *Iris* (Uchiwa fan on bamboo mounts)

81. *Cherries in Blossom. Mount Fuji in the background* (Uchiwa fan)
Publisher: Ibasen

82. *Masts* (Uchiwa fan)

NANIWA MEISHO ZUE

(Views of Naniwa, Osaka)

83. *Dojima Kome Akinai. Rice Market at Dojima*

KYOTO MEISHO

(Famous sights of the Eastern Capital)

84. *Blossom on Arashiyama, Oi River*

85. *Peasants going home at Yase with loads on their heads*

86. *Maples at Tsuten Bridge*

FAMOUS VIEWS OF VARIOUS PROVINCES

87. Undivided Triptych. (*a*) *Shimosa, the Tone River;* (*b*) *Lakeside View at Imagiri;* (*c*) *Yoro, a fall of snow*

KISOKAIDO SERIES

88. *Miya no Koshi. Mist and moonlight*
Publisher: Kinjudo

ROKUJU YOSHU MEISHO ZUE. VIEWS OF FAMOUS PLACES IN THE SIXTY-ODD PROVINCES

89. *Hoki, Distant View of Mount Oyama. Men transplanting Rice* (No. 41)

89*a*. Second Impression of No. 89

90. *Gate of Dyashiro Temple, Izumo in a mist* (No. 42)

Shenval Press